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PAGAN IDEAS OF
IMMORTALITY DURING THE
EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

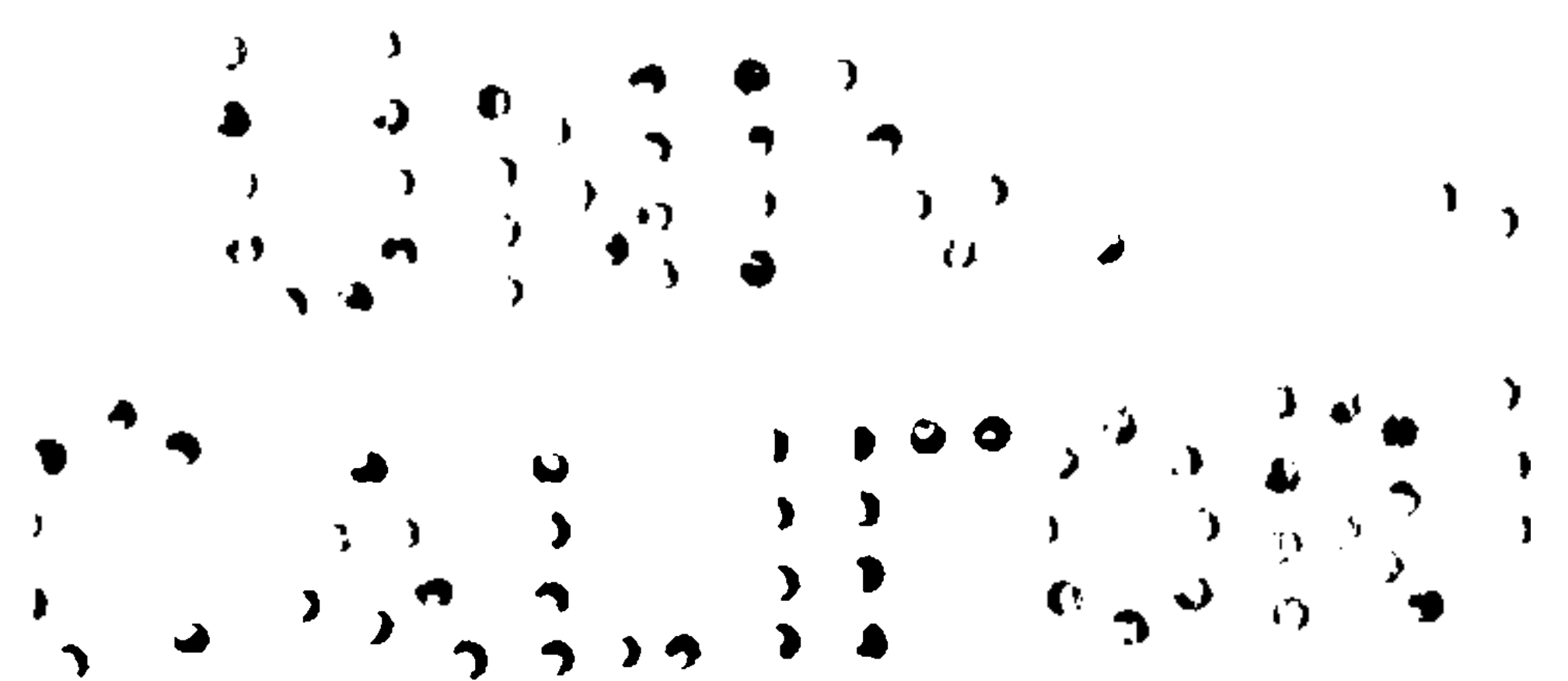
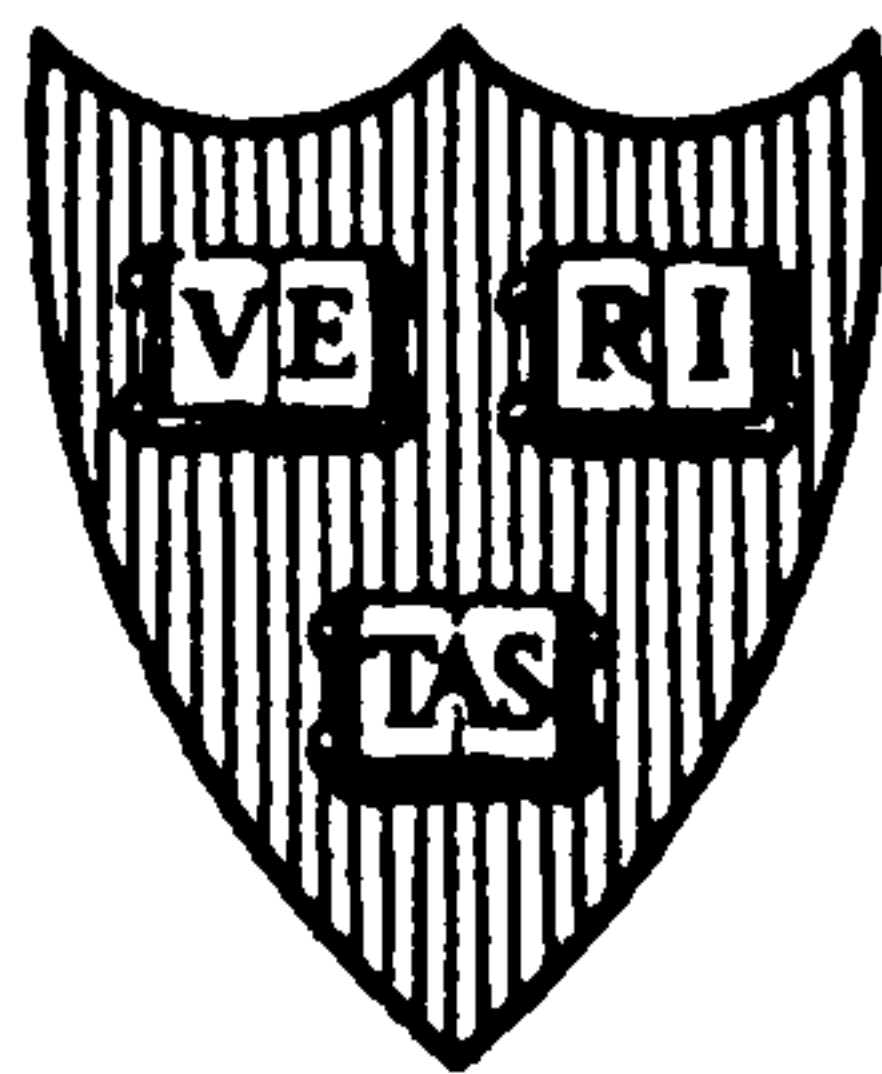
The Ingersoll Lecture, 1918

Pagan Ideas of
Immortality During the
Early Roman Empire

By

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THE INGERSOLL LECTURESHIP

Extract from the will of Miss Caroline Haskell Ingersoll, who died in Keene, County of Cheshire, New Hampshire, Jan. 26, 1893

First. In carrying out the wishes of my late beloved father, George Goldthwait Ingersoll, as declared by him in his last will and testament, I give and bequeath to Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., where my late father was graduated, and which he always held in love and honor, the sum of Five thousand dollars (\$5,000) as a fund for the establishment of a Lectureship on a plan somewhat similar to that of the Dudleian lecture, that is — one lecture to be delivered each year, on any convenient day between the last day of May and the first day of December, on this subject, “the Immortality of Man,” said lecture not to form a part of the usual college course, nor to be delivered by any Professor or Tutor as part of his usual routine of instruction, though any such Professor or Tutor may be appointed to such service. The choice of said lecturer is not to be limited to any one religious denomination, nor to any one profession, but may be that of either clergyman or layman, the appointment to take place at least six months before the delivery of said lecture. The above sum to be safely invested and three fourths of the annual interest thereof to be paid to the lecturer for his services and the remaining fourth to be expended in the publishment and gratuitous distribution of the lecture, a copy of which is always to be furnished by the lecturer for such purpose. The same lecture to be named and known as “the Ingersoll lecture on the Immortality of Man.”

PAGAN IDEAS OF IMMORTALITY DURING THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

I

THE invitation of the committee charged with the administration of the Ingersoll lectureship and my own inclination have agreed in indicating that aspect of the general subject of immortality, which I shall try to present tonight. I shall not venture on this occasion to advance arguments for or against belief in a life after death; my present task is a humbler one: I propose to ask you to review with me some of the more significant ideas concerning an existence beyond the grave, which were current in the Greco-Roman world in the time of Jesus and during the earlier Christian centuries, and to consider

briefly the relation of these pagan beliefs to Christian ideas on the same subject. In dealing with a topic so vast as this in a single hour, we must select those elements which historically showed themselves to be fundamental and vital; but even then we cannot examine much detail. It may prove, however, that a rapid survey of those concepts of the future life, whose influence lasted long during the Christian centuries, and indeed has continued to the present day, may not be without profit.

The most important single religious document from the Augustan Age is the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*; for although the *Aeneid* was written primarily to glorify Roman imperial aims, the sixth book gives full expression to many philosophic and popular ideas of the other world and of the future life, which were current among both Greeks and Romans.¹ It therefore makes a fitting point of depar-

ture for our considerations. In this book, as you will remember, the poet's hero, having reached Italian soil at last, is led down to the lower world by the Cumaean Sybil. This descent to Hades belongs historically to that long series of apocalyptic writings which begins with the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* and closes with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Warde Fowler deserves credit for clearly pointing out that this visit of Aeneas to the world below is the final ordeal for him, a mystic initiation, in which he receives "enlightenment for the toil, peril, and triumph that await him in the accomplishment of his divine mission." When the Trojan hero has learned from his father's shade the mysteries of life and death, and has been taught the magnitude of the work which lies before him, and the great things that are to be, he casts off the timidity which he has hitherto shown and, strengthened

by his experiences, advances to the perfect accomplishment of his task.²

But we are not concerned so much with Virgil's purpose in writing this apocalyptic book, as with its contents and with the evidence it gives as to the current ideas of the other world and the fate of the human soul. What then does the poet tell us of these great matters? We can hardly do better than to follow Aeneas and his guide on their journey. This side of Acheron they meet the souls of those whose bodies are unburied, and who therefore must tarry a hundred years — the maximum of human life — before they may be ferried over the river which bounds Hades. When Charon has set the earthly visitors across that stream, they find themselves in a place where are gathered spirits of many kinds, who have not yet been admitted to Tartarus or Elysium: first the souls of infants and those who met their end by violence —

men condemned to death though innocent, suicides, those who died for love, and warriors — all of whom must here wait until the span of life allotted them has been completed. These spirits passed, the mortal visitors come to the walls of Tartarus, on whose torments Aeneas is not allowed to look, for

“The feet of innocence may never pass
Into this house of sin.”

But the Sybil, herself taught by Hecate, reveals to him the eternal punishments there inflicted for monstrous crimes. Then the visitors pass to Elysium, where dwell the souls of those whose deserts on earth have won for them a happy lot. Nearby in a green valley, Aeneas finds the shade of his own father, Anchises, looking eagerly at the souls which are waiting to be born into the upper world. In answer to his son's questions, the heroic shade discloses the doctrine of rebirths — metempsychosis — with its

tenets of penance and of purification.³ Finally, to fulfill the poet's purpose, Anchises' spirit points out the souls of the heroes who are to come on earth in due season; the spirits of future Romans pass before Aeneas in long array; and at the climax he sees the soul of Augustus, that prince who was destined in the fullness of time to bring back the Golden Age and to impose peace on the wide world. This prophetic revelation ended, Aeneas enlightened and strengthened for his task, returns to the upper world.

This book seems at first a strange compound indeed of popular belief, philosophy, and theology, which is not without its contradictions. On these, however, we need not pause; but for our present interest we must ask what are the main ideas on which this apocalypse is based. First of all, a future life is taken for granted by the poet; otherwise the book could never have been written. Sec-

ondly, we notice that, according to ancient popular belief, the souls of those who had not received the proper burial rites, were doomed to wander on this side of Acheron until a hundred years were completed, and also that souls which were disembodied by violence or by early death, were destined to live out their allotted span of earthly existence before they could enter the inner precincts of Hades. Again the poet represents some few as suffering eternal torments for their monstrous sins or enjoying immortal bliss because of their great deserts. And finally, he shows that the majority of souls must pass through successive lives and deaths, until, purified from the sin and dross of the body by millennial sojourns in the world below, and by virtuous lives on earth, they at last find repose and satisfaction. The popular beliefs which concern details of the future life we shall leave one side for the moment; let us

rather first observe that Virgil's ideas as to rewards and punishments in the next world, as well as his doctrine of successive rebirths and deaths with their accompanying purifications, rest on a moral basis, so that the other world is conceived to be a complement of this: life on earth and life below are opportunities for moral advance without which final happiness cannot be attained. Whence came these ideas of the future life and how far were they current in the ancient world of Virgil's day ?

Naturally it does not follow that, because Rome's greatest poet chose to picture souls surviving their corporeal homes, the average man believed in a future life, but there is abundant evidence that the poet was appealing to widespread beliefs, when he wrote his apocalyptic book.⁴ In fact from the earliest times known to us, both Greeks and Romans held to a belief in some kind of

extended life for souls after the death of the body.⁵ Both peoples had their cults of the dead, rites of tendance and of riddance, festivals both public and private, which leave no doubt that the great majority of men never questioned that the spirits of the departed existed after this life, and that those spirits were endowed with power to harm or to bless the living.⁶ But beyond this rather elementary stage of belief the Romans never went of themselves. The Greeks, however, began early to develop eschatological ideas which had, and which still have, great importance.

The eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, as I have already said, is the oldest "Descent to Hades" in European literature. The souls of the dead are there represented as dwelling in the land of shadows, having no life, but leading an insubstantial existence, without punishment or reward. Such a future world could have no moral

or other value; it could only hang over men as a gloomy prospect of that which awaited them when the suns of this world had forever set. But in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. other ideas came to the front, which were influential throughout later history. In those two centuries fall the first period of Greek individualism and a religious revival — two things not wholly disconnected. The Orphic sect, which appeared in the sixth century, was made up of religious devotees who adopted a purified form of the religion of Dionysus.⁷ The center of the Orphic faith and mystic ceremonial was the myth of the birth, destruction, and rebirth of the god. According to the story, Dionysus was pursued by the Titans, powers hostile to Zeus. In his distress the god changed himself into various creatures, finally taking on the form of a bull, which the Titans tore in pieces and devoured. But the goddess Athena saved

the heart and gave it to Zeus who swallowed it. Hence sprang the new Dionysus. The Titans Zeus destroyed with his thunderbolt and had the ashes scattered to the winds. From these ashes, in one form of the myth, man was made, and therefore he was thought to unite in his person the sinful Titanic nature and the divine Dionysiac spark. The parallelism between this story and the myths of Osiris, Attis, and Adonis is at once evident. They are all gods who die and live again, and thus become lords of death and life, through whom man gains assurance of his own immortality.

Our chief concern with the Orphics here is that they seem to have introduced among the Greeks the idea that the soul of man was divine, was a *δαίμων* which had fallen, and for its punishment was imprisoned in the body as in a tomb. In its corporeal cell it was condemned to suffer defilement until released by death,

when it passed to Hades. Its lot there depended on its life on earth. As an Orphic fragment says: "They who are righteous beneath the rays of the sun, when they die, have a gentler lot in a fair meadow by deep flowing Acheron. . . . But they who have worked wrong and insolence under the rays of the sun are led down beneath Cocytus's watery plain into chill Tartarus."⁸ The soul's sojourn in Hades therefore was a time of punishment and of purification, even as life itself was a penance for sin. According to a common belief, at least in Plato's day, after a thousand years the soul entered a new incarnation, and so on through ten rounds of earth and Hades, until at last, freed from sin and earthly dross by faithful observance of a holy life on earth and by the purification which it underwent below, it returned to its divine abode; but those who persisted in sin were condemned to all the

punishments which man's imagination could devise; the wicked were doomed to lie in mud and filth, while evil demons rent their vitals. Indeed the horrors which the medieval Christian loved to depict in order to terrify the wicked and to rejoice the faithful, were first devised by the Orphics and their heirs, for exactly the same purpose.

But what bases did the Orphics find for their belief in the divine nature of the soul? In their mythology they had said that man was created out of the ashes of the Titans in which a spark of Dionysus still remained. But in fact they seem to have rested on faith or intuition, without working out clearly a philosophic answer. They were indeed deeply conscious of man's dual nature; they perceived that on the one hand he is pulled by his baser instincts and desires, which they naturally attributed to the body, and that on the other hand he is prompted by nobler

aspirations, which they assigned to his soul. This higher part of man's dual self was, for them, the Dionysiac element in him. And man's moral obligation they held to be to free this divine element from the clogging weight of the body, to cease to "blind his soul with clay." So far as we are aware, the Orphics were the first among the Greeks to make the divinity of the soul a motive for the religious life, and perhaps the first to see that, if the soul is divine, it may naturally be regarded as eternally so, and therefore as immortal. What more momentous thoughts as to the soul's nature and its destiny could any sect have introduced than these? They were shared by their contemporaries, the Pythagoreans; in fact it is hard to say with certainty which sect developed these concepts first.⁹

But the Orphic-Pythagorean confidence in the immortality of the soul was

at the most only an emotional belief. It remained for Plato in the early fourth century to give that belief a philosophic basis and thereby to transform it into a reasonable article of religion. This he fundamentally did, when he brought his concept of the reasoning soul into connection with his doctrine of "forms" or "ideas." He maintained that behind this transient phenomenal world known to us through the senses, lies another world, the world of ideas, invisible, permanent, and real, which can be grasped by the reason only. These permanent ideas, he said, are of various grades and degrees, the supreme idea being that of the Good and the Beautiful, which is the cause of all existence, truth, and knowledge; it at once comprehends these things within itself and is superior to them; it is the Absolute, God.¹⁰

But all the ideas, including the Absolute, are, as I have just said, appre-

hended not by man's senses but by his intellect. Therefore, argues Plato, man's reasoning soul must have the same nature as the ideas; like them, it must belong to the world above the senses and with them it must partake of the Absolute. Moreover, since the ideas are eternal and immortal, it inevitably follows that man's reasoning soul has existed from eternity and will exist forever.¹¹

This is not the occasion to discuss the validity of Plato's doctrine. Aristotle stated, once for all, the fundamental objections to his teacher's views.¹² But we shall readily grant that, if we accept Plato's doctrine, his conclusions as to the immortality of the soul may logically follow and that no further evidence is needed to convince us. Yet Plato was not content to let the matter rest on this single argument, for in other dialogues he adduces proofs which do not seem so convincing to us as to their author. He

attempts to prove immortality from the self-motion of the soul, again from the dim recollections out of an earlier existence which enable one to recall axiomatic truths or to recognize relations, as in mathematics — things which one has never learned in this present life. On another occasion he argues from the unchanging nature of the soul and from the soul's superiority to the body. But he seems to have thought the most convincing proof was the fact that the notion of life is inseparable from our concept of the soul; that is, a dead soul is unthinkable. For all these reasons, therefore, he argued that the soul must be immortal.¹³

Whatever we may think of Plato's different proofs, they have furnished the armories of apologists almost down to our own day. In antiquity they were constantly repeated, in whole or in part, not only by devoted members of the Academy and later by the Neoplatonists,

but by the Eclectics and others, like Cicero in the first book of his *Tusculan Disputations*, and at the close of Scipio's Dream; they were borrowed by the Stoics, and some eight hundred years after Plato had first formulated them, they were employed by St. Augustine in his tract *De Immortalitate Animae*. The religious intuition of the Orphic and Pythagorean then was given a rational basis by Plato, and thus supported, proved so convincing to antiquity that Plato's views were the most important of all in supporting belief in the soul's immortality. They were in large measure taken up by the Christian church, and, as has been often shown, the doctrine of a spiritual immortality apart and free from the body, was of immense service to primitive Christianity, when the hope of the early return of Christ to found a new kingdom on earth faded before the lengthening years.

To Plato himself his belief in immortality was of the greatest moment, for the whole fabric of his ethical and political philosophy is built against the background of that doctrine. And indeed we should all grant much validity to the argument that the human reason, though weak and limited, is one with the divine and infinite reason; otherwise the human could have no understanding of the divine. But when it is further argued that if the human reason is of the same nature with the divine, it must be eternal and immortal, we may reply that, even so, we are not convinced that the individual soul must therefore have a conscious and separate existence through all eternity; its identity may be lost by absorption into the universal reason, the supreme idea. This is a matter on which Plato nowhere delivers a clear opinion, but his thought is so plainly centered on the individual soul that we can hardly

believe that it was possible for him to conceive of the soul's personality ever being lost in the Absolute.

Although Plato and his greatest pupil, Aristotle, regarded man's reasoning soul as spiritual, something distinct from matter, few ancient thinkers were able to rise to the concept of the immateriality of man's reasoning nature. The Stoics, who in their eclectic system borrowed from both Plato and Aristotle, as well as from many other predecessors, held to a strict materialism which they took from Heraclitus. But to their material principle they applied a concept which they took from Aristotle, for they recognized in all things the existence of an active and a passive principle, and they said that by the action of the former on the latter, all phenomena were produced. The active principle they called reason, intelligence, the cause of all things. It was the world-reason which,

according to their view, permeated every part of the cosmos, causing and directing all things. To express their concept of its nature, they often named it Fire, the most powerful and active of the elements, or rather the primordial element; again they often called it God, for they did not hesitate to speak of this immanent principle as a person. Furthermore, since man is a part of the cosmos, the world-reason expresses itself in him. Indeed man's reason, the directing element of the human soul, is itself a part of the world-reason, or in Epictetus' striking phrase, man is "a fragment of God."¹⁴ At this point the Stoic and the Platonist were in accord, although the paths of thought which they had travelled were very different. Yet the Stoic could not agree with the Platonist that the individual soul survived forever, since he held to a cyclical theory of the cosmos, according to which this present universe

was temporal. It had been created by the eternal fire, by the world-reason, from itself, and it was destined in due season to sink back again into universal fire. Meantime, according to the views of most Stoics, the souls of the just would survive this body, ascending to the spheres above the world, where they would dwell until absorbed once more into the divine element from which they sprang. To the souls of the wicked only a short period at most of post-corporeal existence was granted — brevity of life or annihilation was their punishment.¹⁵

Strictly speaking, the prospect of the limited existence after death, which the Stoics held out as virtue's reward, should have had little value for the philosophic mind, especially as their philosophy offered no warrant that personality would survive at all. But it would seem that men at every period of human history have had immortal longings in them so

strong that they have eagerly embraced the assurance of even a brief respite from annihilation; certain it is that to many Greeks and Romans the Stoic doctrine of a limited existence after death was a strong incentive to virtue and a consolation in the midst of this world's trials.

But no doctrine of the post-corporeal existence of the soul has ever had the field entirely to itself. We know that in antiquity even the Stoic conception of the soul's limited survival, to say nothing of Platonic beliefs in actual immortality, met with much opposition and denial among the intellectual classes. The Epicureans, with their thorough-going atomistic materialism, would not allow that the soul had any existence apart from the body; on the contrary, they held that the soul came into being at the moment of conception, grew with the body, and, at the body's death, was once more dissolved into the atoms from which it first

was formed. Epicurean polemics were directed against both popular superstitions and Platonic metaphysics; the attacks had the advantage of offering rational, and for the day scientific, explanations of natural phenomena, which fed human curiosity as to the causes of things, and which, if accepted, might logically lead to that freedom from the soul's perturbation which was the aim of the teaching. Moreover, the noble resignation, the high moral and humane zeal, which characterized the Epicurean School at its best, as well as its easy decline into hedonistic appeals, made it popular, especially in the last two centuries before our era. But the very fire and passion of Lucretius, its most gifted Latin exponent, give us the impression that after all most men were not moved to find the peace which the poet promised them, if they would but accept the doctrine of the soul's dissolution at the moment of death.

The Sceptics also, who claimed not an inconsiderable number of intellectuals, doubted the possibility of a future life, or found themselves unable to decide the matter at all. Like Tennyson's Sage they would declare:

“Thou canst not prove that thou art body
alone,
Nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit
alone,
Nor canst thou prove that thou art both in
one:
Thou canst not prove that thou art immortal,
no,
Nor yet that thou art mortal.”

Indeed it is true that of all the philosophic sects at the beginning of our era, only those which were imbued with Platonic and Orphic-Pythagorean ideas, had confidence in the soul's immortality. The Stoic position we have already discussed. Some scholars, following Rohde,¹⁶ claim that there was little be-

lief in any kind of a future life among the educated classes at the time we are considering; this I hold to be an error, although it is certain that the Epicureans and Sceptics had a large following. In any case we need to remind ourselves that the intellectuals are always a small minority, whose views may not represent in any way popular beliefs.

We are, however, not without evidence that there were doubters among the common people. Flippant epigrams and epitaphs show that men could at least assume a cynicism toward life and a light-heartedness toward death which equal Lucian's. More than once we can read funerary inscriptions to this effect: "I was nothing, I am nothing. Do thou who art still alive, eat, drink, be merry, come."¹⁷ Or sentiments like this: "Once I had no existence; now I have none. I am not aware of it. It does not concern me."¹⁸ Again we find the denial: "In

Hades there is no boat, no Charon, no Aeacus who holds the keys, no Cerberus. All of us, whom death has taken away are rotten bones and ashes; nothing more.”¹⁹ The sentiments are perhaps as old as thinking man. They have at times touches of humor which call forth a smile, as in the anxious inquiries of Callimachus’ epigram: “Charidas, what is below?” “Deep darkness.” “But what of the paths upward?” “All a lie.” “And Pluto?” “Mere talk.” “Then we’re lost.”²⁰

Such expressions, of course, must not be given too much weight in our reckoning. The longing for annihilation, which appeals at times to most weary mortals, also led to dedications “to eternal rest” or “to eternal sleep.”²¹ But after all the number of such epitaphs is comparatively small. In the nature of the case many funerary inscriptions give no testimony for or against a belief in

immortality; but large numbers show confidence, or a hope, in a future life.

II

The time has now come for us to return from our rather long historical survey to Virgil's *Apocalypse*, and to listen to the words with which Anchises' shade taught his eager son:

“ Know first that heaven and earth and ocean's
plain,
The moon's bright orb, and stars of Titan
birth
Are nourished by one Life; one primal Mind,
Immingled with the vast and general frame,
Fills every part and stirs the mighty whole.
Thence man and beast, thence creatures of
the air,
And all the swarming monsters that be found
Beneath the level of the marbled sea;
A fiery virtue, a celestial power,
Their native seeds retain; but bodies vile,
With limbs of clay and members born to die,
Encumber and o'ercloud; whence also spring
Terrors and passions, suffering and joy;

For from deep darkness and captivity
All gaze but blindly on the radiant world.
Nor when to life's last beam they bid farewell
May sufferers cease from pain, nor quite be
freed
From all their fleshly plagues; but by fixed
law,
The strange, inveterate taint works deeply in.
For this, the chastisement of evils past
Is suffered here, and full requital paid.
Some hang on high, outstretched to viewless
winds;
For some their sin's contagion must be purged
In vast ablution of deep-rolling seas,
Or burned away in fire. Each man receives
His ghostly portion in the world of dark;
But thence to realms Elysian we go free,
Where for a few these seats of bliss abide,
Till time's long lapse a perfect orb fulfills,
And takes all taint away, restoring so
The pure, ethereal soul's first virgin fire.
At last, when the millennial aeon strikes,
God calls them forth to yon Lethaeon stream,
In numerous host, that thence, oblivious all,
They may behold once more the vaulted
sky,
And willingly to shapes of flesh return." 22

These words express the commingled beliefs of Orphic, Pythagorean, Platonist, and Stoic. How extensively such beliefs were held by Virgil's contemporaries we cannot say with accuracy, but certain it is that this book and this passage would never have made the religious appeal which they made in antiquity, if they had not corresponded to widespread convictions.

But Virgil's sixth book contains much more than the eschatological views of philosophic schools; it reflects to an extraordinary degree popular ideas and practices. I have already referred to the fact that it represents a mystic initiation of Virgil's hero as preparation for his holy task. Now we know that at all times the convictions of the majority of men are founded not on the arguments which thinkers can supply, but on hopes, intuitions, and emotional experiences. Such were the grounds on which the

Orphic built his hope of the purified soul's ultimate happiness. More popular than Orphism were the Greek mysteries, of which the most important were those celebrated annually at Eleusis in Attica. There the story of the rape of Proserpina, of Demeter's search for her daughter, and of the daughter's recovery, formed the center of a mystic ceremonial. Originally these mysteries were no doubt agricultural rites intended to call to life the dead grain in the spring. But before the seventh century, B.C., the festival had been transformed; the miracle of the reviving vegetation, of the grain which dies and lives again, here, as so many times elsewhere, had become the symbol and assurance of human immortality.²³

Before admission to the annual celebration the would-be initiate was duly purified. During the celebration the initiated, by their own acts, recalled Deme-

ter's hunt for her daughter, roaming the shore with lighted torches; like the goddess, they fasted and then broke their fast by drinking a holy potion of meal and water; in the great hall of initiation they witnessed a mystic drama, perhaps saw holy objects exhibited and explained. In any case they underwent an emotional experience which so confirmed their intuitional belief in immortality, that they were confident of peace and happiness in this life and of blessedness in the life to come, where they would join in the sacred dance, while the uninitiated would be wretched. Many are the expressions of this ecclesiastical confidence. The Homeric hymn of Demeter promised: "Blessed is he among mortal men who has seen these rites."²⁴ Pindar, early in the fifth century, wrote: "Happy he who has seen these things and then goes beneath the earth, for he knows the end of life and its Zeus-given beginning."²⁵

Sophocles said: "Thrice blessed are they who have seen these rites, and then go to the house of Hades, for they alone have life there, but all others have only woe." ²⁶ At the close of the fifth century Aristophanes made his chorus of mystae sing: "For we alone have a sun and a holy light, we who have been initiated, and who live honorably toward friends and strangers, reverencing the gods." ²⁷ In the third century of the Christian era, an official of the mysteries set up an inscription which declares: "Verily glorious is that mystery vouchsafed by the blessed gods, for death is no ill for mortals, but rather a good." ²⁸

It is difficult for us now to appreciate the widespread influence of these Eleusinian mysteries. They had many branches; at Eleusis they continued to be celebrated until 396 A.D., when Alaric the Goth destroyed Demeter's ancient shrine. Other Greek mysteries also

flourished in the Mediterranean world: those of Samothrace; the mysteries of Bacchus, whose excesses brought down the displeasure of the Roman Senate in 186 B.C.; and in later times the mysteries of Hecate or Diana. All had this in common, that they gave the initiate assurance of a happy immortality.

Under the Roman Empire the longing for religious satisfaction through mystic rites and revelations found new and exotic sources of gratification. Slaves, traders, and finally soldiers from Hellenized Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor, carried their gods throughout the Mediterranean world, and even beyond, to the Atlantic Ocean, to Hadrian's Wall in Britain, to the Rhine and Danube, and to the borders of the African desert. The invasion of the West by these oriental gods began in 204 B.C., when, in answer to the Roman Senate's invitation, the Asiatic Great Mother of the Gods took up her

residence in Rome. Many other divinities came during the succeeding centuries; but three remained most prominent: the Great Mother of the Gods, whom I have just mentioned, with her attendant Attis; Egyptian Isis and her associate divinities, who were worshipped in Rome as early as Cicero's day; and the Persian Mithras, whose cult became influential in the West toward the close of the first century of our era.²⁹ These religions added to their exotic charm that spell which great age casts over men's imaginations. Osiris, the husband of Isis, had been lord of the dead in Egypt for more than two thousand years; Attis and the Great Mother belonged to an immemorial antiquity; while Mithras had his origin in the remoter East, at a period to which neither Greek nor Roman knowledge ran. Moreover, Attis and Osiris, like Dionysus and Persephone among the Greeks, or the

Semitic Adonis and Tammuz, were gods who died and lived again, and who therefore became warrants of man's immortality. Mithras belonged to another class of divinities. He was held to be the benefactor and constant supporter of mankind. According to the sacred legend, he had himself wrestled with the powers of darkness and had established civilization on earth, before he ascended to heaven, whence he was believed to aid his faithful followers in their constant struggle against the servants of Ahri-man, the lord of wickedness.

The devotees of these gods formed sacred communities, admission to which was obtained by secret initiation; the rituals were mysteries in which the devotee had pictured to him, or himself acted out, the sacred drama, whereby he received assurance of divine protection here and of a happy immortality hereafter. The initiate, moreover, was

believed to experience a new birth and to enter into union with his god, so that he became Osiris-Serapis, or Attis, or Mithras, even as the Dionysiac devotee became a Bacchus.

To the question how the comforting assurance of present safety and of future immortality was given the initiate, we can return no more satisfactory answer than we can make in the case of the Greek mysteries; yet we may get some hint from the words which the Latin writer, Apuleius, puts into the mouth of his hero, Lucius, who was initiated into the rites of Isis. This is all that he might tell: "I approached the bounds of death. I trod the threshold of Proserpina. I was carried through all the elements and returned again to the upper air. At dead of night I saw the sun glowing with a brilliant light. The gods of heaven and of hell I approached in every person and worshipped face to

face.”³⁰ Obscure as these words are, much is plain. In some way the devotee was made to believe that he, like Virgil’s hero, had passed through the world of the dead and had been born again into a new life; he had touched the elements — earth, air, water, and fire, the very foundations of the visible cosmos; he had seen the sun which ever shines on the consecrated; and he had been granted the beatific vision. Therefore he knew that his salvation was secure forever.

Furthermore in these mystery religions preparation for the emotional experiences of initiation was made by means of lustral baths, fasting, abstinence, and penance; once consecrated, the devotee supported his religious life by following a prescribed regimen and by participating in frequent holy offices; degrees of initiation and grades of office marked his advance in faithful proficiency; while

magic words and formulae, committed to memory, assured him a safe passage from this world to the next.

The oriental mysteries enjoyed a widespread popularity, except in Greece, under the Roman Empire down to the latter half of the third century. Then they began to lose their hold in the Roman provinces before the growing power of Christianity; yet in the city of Rome they stubbornly held their ground until the end of the fourth century. The first St. Peter's was built hard beside a shrine of the Great Mother of the Gods; there for three-quarters of a century the old and the new mysteries strove in conscious rivalry, until at last Cybele was forced to yield to Christ.

The last centuries before the birth of Jesus and the opening centuries of our era were marked by an increasing religious longing and unrest, first among the Greeks and then among the Romans.

There was a weariness and a dissatisfaction with the inherited forms of religious expression; and many felt a sense of separation from God, of a gulf between the human and the divine, which they hoped might be bridged by a direct revelation, by a vision, which would grant immediate knowledge of God. These eager desires led in part to an increase in superstition and credulity, over which we need not now pause; in part to the resort to the oriental mysteries of which I have just spoken; and in part to a revival of Pythagorean mysticism and of mystic Platonism among the intellectuals, who no longer felt that the reason and the will gave them the assurance which they required.

The later mystic philosophies laid much stress on an ascetic discipline in this life, to secure the soul's purification, and all taught that the great end of man was to attain to the knowledge of God,

wherein lay man's supreme happiness. Such knowledge, it was thought, could come only through a revelation. Here these philosophies agreed with the teaching of the oriental mysteries, and indeed with popular belief as well. On the question of the immortality of the soul, however, the later mystics brought forward no new arguments. Plotinus, the greatest of the Neoplatonists, virtually repeats the proofs adduced by the founder of the Academy.³¹ Undoubtedly during the opening centuries of the Christian era there was a growing belief in the soul's immortality, or at least an increasing hope of a future life, but such hopes and beliefs, outside Christianity, were not based on new arguments. Plato had once for all in antiquity, supplied the philosophic grounds for confidence. Only in modern times have new arguments of any weight been adduced.

Let us now pause to summarize the results of the considerations which have thus far occupied us. We may fairly say that, in spite of popular doubt, intellectual scepticism, and philosophic denial, beliefs in some kind of existence beyond the grave were widespread in the Greco-Roman world at the beginning of our era. For many, probably for most, belief did not advance beyond inherited intuitions, fears, or hopes, which were fostered by tendance of the dead, prescribed by immemorial custom. Many, both the simple and the learned, found their assurance in diverse forms of Greek mysteries; others, again, strengthened to endure the buffetings of this life by the resolute doctrines of Stoicism, were satisfied with the extended, though limited, future existence vouchsafed the virtuous; while the later Platonists, returning to the mystic Orphic-Pythagorean elements which had influenced the

founder of their school, offered their disciples arguments in favor of a genuine immortality. Under the Empire the supports of faith became more numerous and appealing. At the lowest end of the scale were charlatans, as there had been since Plato's day,³² who imposed on the fears and hopes of their victims for their own mercenary ends. Higher were those inspiring Eastern mysteries which were carried to the remotest provinces, binding their devotees by initiation, ritual service, and a prescribed regimen, more constantly to a religious life than Greek mysteries had ever done; and the great end of all was the assurance that the souls of the faithful should not die, but should mount to the upper heavens to be at one with God.

The last vital philosophy of antiquity was Neoplatonism, on which we have just touched; the chief aim of the Neoplatonist also was to secure union with

the Divine, and his greatest article of faith was the soul's immortality. If this theosophic philosophy seem to any of poor account, I would remind him that by Origen and Augustine Neoplatonism was brought into Christian thought, where it has been operative ever since.

III

In view of the facts with which we have been occupied we shall not make the error of thinking that Christianity brought the hope of immortality among men, for, as we have seen, hope — nay, sure confidence, in the soul's survival was widespread throughout the ancient world when Jesus began his ministry. What can we say of early Christian teaching, and how was it related to its pagan environment ?

Christianity grew out of Judaism. Now it is a striking fact that the Jews were later than most of the peoples about

them in conceiving of individual immortality.³³ Clinging to monotheism and absorbed in the life of their nation, they had cut themselves off from some of the ideas developed by their neighbors. To follow out the intricate and uncertain history of eschatological ideas among the Jews would be too difficult here. We may simply say that when Jesus began his ministry a considerable part of the Jews had abandoned the expectation of a material kingdom of God and looked forward to a spiritual kingdom on a transformed earth or in heaven. In this kingdom those would share, who through God's grace and their own righteousness had won a place therein; but the wicked were either to be punished forever or to be utterly destroyed. To these ideas Jesus' teaching was closely related, although he gave a nobler meaning to Jewish doctrine, and he did not limit the hope of a future existence so narrowly as

some would do. Moreover, he adopted from the law the teaching which made salvation and future happiness depend on a love for God and for one's fellow-men, which would result in an unselfish life of righteousness. Salvation, he taught, was a present experience, open to every man who conformed to the requirement.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the Apostles and their successors naturally made his person, death, and resurrection the great means through which his followers secured salvation. Paul, moreover, taught that through faith — using the word in a somewhat unusual sense — the believer secured the actual presence of Christ within him, entered into a mystic union with the divine Saviour, by which the man was freed from sin and reborn into a new spiritual life; this new life was confirmed by the indwelling Holy Spirit which completed the man's

moral regeneration. In the Fourth Gospel we find a similar doctrine of a mystic union with Christ, secured by belief in Him as the incarnate Word — a belief which brought about a spiritual rebirth and therewith gave a present warrant of eternal life.³⁴

It is unnecessary for our present purpose to examine the beliefs of the earliest Christians as to the resurrection or the second coming of Christ, which they expected to take place within their own time — these beliefs and many others the Apostolic Church derived naturally from their Jewish tradition and from the teachings of Jesus. I shall ask you rather to focus your thought on the fundamental ideas of this early Christianity: that is to say, on the revelation of God, the punishment of sin by suffering or annihilation, the mystic union with the Divine, and a happy immortality as a reward for faith and righteousness. Were these

ideas foreign to the peoples of the Mediterranean area? No, our survey has reminded us that on the contrary they were familiar over wide stretches of the Greco-Roman world.

Do not misunderstand me here. Of course I am not making the elementary blunder of saying that because certain beliefs of the Christians and the Pagans were similar, they therefore were identical, or that they were derived from one another, or that the many factors of which they were composed were the same. No one with any knowledge of the history of religious thought could maintain that. But the point which I do wish to emphasize is this, viz.: that the eschatological ideas widely current in the Mediterranean world were such that Christianity found a favorable environment when it began its proselyting work. This seems to me one of the most significant facts in the relation of early

Christianity to paganism. The Christian teachings as to the means by which the assurance of a happy immortality was to be secured could hardly seem very strange at first hearing to any one who was familiar with mystery religions or with much of the religious philosophy current in the pagan world during the early Christian centuries. Closer examination would reveal fundamental differences between Christian belief and the pagan hope. But it is not insignificant that Christianity spread most rapidly at first in Syria and Asia Minor, countries long familiar with those mystic religions, which had promised what the nobler faith supplied.

IV

Although we now have examined the conditions which, to my mind, are the most significant in the relation of pagan ideas of immortality to those of early Christianity, there yet remain matters

which, if less important, are still of more than merely curious interest. We shall now look at some of these questions.

What notions of heaven and of hell did the Greeks and Romans have ? This inquiry is often made. The reply is easily given. Man has always painted hell and paradise after his own conception of suffering and of happiness, just as truly as he has made God after his own image. Consequently the ancient's ideas of the future life ranged all the way from the grossest materialistic concepts to highly spiritualized beliefs. Plato in the *Republic* makes Adeimantus say that some seem to think that an immortality of drunkenness is virtue's highest meed.³⁵ But Socrates conceived the future state to be something very different; a place in which he could hold high discourse with the great ones of the past.³⁶ In general, however, punishment and rewards were of a material sort, for such

are most easily imagined and understood. Has it been otherwise with Christians? The answer is to be found in Christian apocalypses, medieval monuments, renaissance art, and in our own minds. Of course there developed in Greek thought what we might call an orthodox geography and scheme for the other world, of which Virgil gives us a just picture. Interesting as it might prove to examine the details of this picture, we will rather turn to other matters.

When Christianity spread among the Gentiles, it at once came under influences which inevitably left their marks in its thought and practice. Let me offer two illustrations.

Early in the hour I spoke of Aeneas' journey through the lower world as an initiation by which he was enlightened and strengthened for the great task that lay before him; and we have now seen that in all the mysteries, both Greek and

oriental, there were initiatory rites, in which the novice symbolically died to the old life and was born again into a new existence. Moreover, through his emotional experience he received assurance that his salvation was secure forever. The idea of the new birth belongs to Christianity also from the first. Paul held that it was brought about by faith; the author of the Fourth Gospel taught that it was secured by love and belief. Baptism in primitive Christianity was at first symbolical — an act of ritual purification, which was believed to indicate the remission of sins and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit.³⁷ But by the second century Christianity had become a mystery in the Greek sense, into which the novice, after a period of preparation, was duly initiated by baptism; and indeed the act was believed to have a magic power to secure immortality, closely parallel to that of the pagan in-

itiation.³⁸ We all know that the ecclesiastical confidence which such belief inspires is far from unknown today.

Again you will recall that when Anchises' shade was instructing Aeneas in the meaning of life and death, he said:

“ Nor when to life's last beam they bid farewell
May sufferers cease from pain, nor quite be
freed

From all their fleshly plagues; but by fixed law,
The strange, inveterate taint works deeply in.

For this, the chastisement of evils past

Is suffered here, and full requital paid.

Some hang on high, outstretched to viewless
winds;

For some their sin's contagion must be purged

In vast ablution of deep-rolling seas,

Or burned away in fire. Each man receives

His ghostly portion in the world of dark.”

Thus the sojourn of the soul in the world below for the thousand years which must elapse before it could be born again, was a period of cleansing from ancient sin. This idea of purification we have already

seen to be as old as the Orphics; it was made an important element by Plato; and indeed all who held to the doctrine of rebirths regarded the periods between earthly existences as times of moral punishment and cleansing. There were certain analogies in Mithraism. Orthodox Christianity could not adopt the doctrine of metempsychosis, although some Gnostics found this possible, by rejecting the resurrection of the body. But beyond question the Greek doctrine of post-mortem purgation from sin, combining with ideas inherited from the Old Testament, has been influential in the development of a Christian belief in purification, especially by fire, in an intermediate state between death and paradise. The doctrine of purgatory, in somewhat different forms, has been held by both the Eastern and the Western Churches. Although this doctrine did not become a definite part of the theol-

ogy of the Western Church until the time of Gregory the Great (590–604), nevertheless traces of it can be found in the earlier Church writers. Origen held that even the perfect must pass through fire after death;³⁹ St. Augustine was less confident, but he thought it not past belief that imperfect souls might be saved by cleansing flames.⁴⁰ The Western Church, from St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth to Bellarmino in the sixteenth century held the doctrine that the cleansing fire was as material as that of any Stoic; but today that view has in large part been abandoned.⁴¹

These two illustrations must suffice to suggest the ways in which Christian thought was influenced by its pagan environment.

Finally we will consider an example of parallelism between pagan and Christian ideas. It is evident that the Greeks, who made such large use of successive

rebirths, following periods of punishment and purification below, thought of these repeated lives and deaths as forming a moral series, so that moral progress, or degeneracy, at one stage was inseparably connected with both the preceding and the following stages. To them life here and life in the other world were indissolubly bound together. This was also as true of Stoicism with its limited reward for uprightness, as it was of Platonism. The Greek mysteries, which did not concern themselves with metempsychosis, by the fifth century before our era likewise made future happiness depend in part at least on righteousness in this life; the oriental mysteries too made this existence the condition of the next. In short, we may say that wherever men believed in any kind of a future existence, they almost universally held to the common belief that future happiness was to be the reward of a virtuous life on

earth. But this is one of the fundamental principles of Christianity. Paganism, therefore, was in accord on this point with its enemy, and thereby favored the propagation of the new religion; moreover, the superior ethical demands of Christianity and its humanitarian principles no doubt found a ready response, especially in enlightened circles.

So we have returned to that which seems to me most important in the relations of paganism and of early Christianity. In many ways paganism provided an environment favorable for the spread of the religion which Jesus founded. The two were at many points irreconcilable, and the former has not always benefited the latter by its influence; but it is a grave historical error not to recognize the areas in which the thought of the two ran parallel. Is the nobler faith the poorer because its paths were made broad by the pagan in his search after Immortality ?

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES

1. Eduard Norden, *Aeneis, Buch VI*, Leipzig, 1903, is most useful for its commentary, especially on religious and philosophic matters.

2. W. Warde Fowler, *The Religious Experience of the Roman People*, Macmillan Co., 1911, pp. 419 ff.

So Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise secured his conversion and salvation, bringing him finally to freedom and to knowledge. *Paradiso*, XXXI, 85-87 and XXXIII entire.

3. Metempsychosis was the subject of the Ingersoll lecture by Professor George Foot Moore in 1914. Therefore that theme is not discussed here.

4. Cf. Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners*, Routledge, London, 1910, iii, chap. II.

5. On the pre-Hellenic periods, see Schuchhardt, *Schliemann's Excavations*, New York, 1891, passim; Lagrange, *La Crète Ancienne*, Paris, 1908, chap. II; Baikie, *The Sea-Kings of Crete*, London, 1910, chap. XI.

6. Cf. Fairbanks, *Greek Religion*, New York, 1910, pp. 168-188; Stengel, *Griechische Kultusaltertümer*, 2d ed., Munich, 1898, § 80; Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 2d ed., Munich, 1912, § 36; W. Warde Fowler, *Religious Experience of the Roman People*, London, 1911, passim; and especially Lecture XVII, "Mysticism — Ideas

of the Future Life; " C. Pascal, *Le Credenze d'Oltretomba*, 2 vols., 1912.

7. B. I. Wheeler, *Dionysos and Immortality*, Ingersoll Lecture for 1898-99. The classic work on Orphism is Rohde, *Psyche: Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, 3d ed., Tübingen, 1903, vol. ii.

8. *Frg.* 154 Abel.

9. Apparently Orphism was already established at Croton in southern Italy when Pythagoras arrived there about 530 B.C.; but the matter is very uncertain. It is clear that Orphism and Pythagoreanism soon coalesced, even if they were originally distinct.

10. *Rep.*, vi, 508 f. It should be said that the identity of Plato's supreme idea with God is denied by some Platonists; but cf. *Phil.* 22 C; *Tim.* 28 A-29 E, 57 A, 92 C.

11. The doctrine of ideas is developed in the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Meno*, *Symposium*, and especially in the *Republic*. In the *Sophist* and the *Parmenides*, Plato criticizes his own views acutely.

12. *Metaphys.*, i, 9; vi, 8; xii, 10; xiii, 3.

13. *Phaedrus*, 245 (cf. *Laws*, x, 894 B ff., xii, 966 E); *Phaedo*, 72 ff., 86, 105; *Meno*, 81 ff.

14. *Diss.*, i, 14, 6; ii, 8, 11.

15. Cf. E. V. Arnold, *Roman Stoicism*, University Press, Cambridge (Eng.), 1911, chap. XI.

16. Rohde, *Psyche*, ii³, 379 ff.

17. *CIL.*, ii, 1434; cf. 1877, 2262.

18. *CIL.*, v, 1939.

19. *CIL.*, vi, 14672 = *Ins. Graec.*, xiv, 1746.

20. Call., *Epig.*, 13, 3 ff.

21. *CIL.*, iii, 5825; vi, 9280, 10848; x, 6706; etc.

22. *Aen.*, vi, 723-751. Translation by Theodore C. Williams, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1908.

23. On these mysteries, see Rohde, *Psyche*, i³, pp. 278 ff.; Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, iii, 126-213; A. Mommsen, *Feste der Stadt Athen*, pp. 204-277, 405-421.

24. 480 f.

25. *Frg.* 137.

26. *Frg.* 753.

27. 454 ff.

28. *Eph. Arch.*, iii (1883), p. 81, 8.

29. On these and other oriental gods, see F. Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, Chicago, 1911; also G. Showerman, *The Great Mother of the Gods*, 1901; Hepding, *Attis*, 1903; W. Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 2 vols., 1911; G. A. Reisner, *The Egyptian Conception of Immortality*, Ingersoll Lecture for 1911; F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, 2 vols., 1894-1900; Id., *Les Mystères de Mithra*, 2 ed., 1902; English translation, 1910.

30. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, xi, 23.

31. *Enn.*, iv, 7.

32. Cf. Plato, *Rep.*, 364 B ff.; *Demosth.*, xviii, 259; Apul., *Met.*, viii, 24 ff.

33. R. H. Charles, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, in Judaism, and*

in Christianity, London, 1899, is a convenient book, but one which must be used with caution.

34. A. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, i, 4th ed., 1909; English translation from the third German edition, 1901; G. B. Stevens, *The Theology of the New Testament*, 1903; H. Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie*, 2 vols., 2d ed., 1911.

35. *Rep.*, ii, 363 D.

36. *Apol.*, 41.

37. It should be said that even in the earliest period Christian baptism had certain magical notions attached to it; not, however, the belief that it secured immortality.

38. Cf. Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages on the Christian Church*, x, B; Anrich, *Das antike Mysterienwesen in seinem Einfluss auf das Christentum*, 1894, pp. 168 ff., especially 179 ff.

39. *Hom. in Num.*, xxv; *in Ps.* xxxvi, 3.

40. *C. D.*, xx, 25; xxi, 13 (where Virgil's verses given above are quoted), 26; *de octo Dulcitii Quaest.*, Qu. i, 13; *Enchiridion*, lxix.

41. St. Thomas, *Opera* (Venice, 1759), xii, p. 575, *Distinctio* xxi, *Quaes.* 1, *Sol.* 3; xiii, p. 347 ff., *Distinctio* xliv, *Quaes.* 3, *Art.* 4, *Quaestiunc.* 3; Bellarmino, *de Purgatorio*, II, x-xii.

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